

Reflections on Veterans Day

In 1944, along the northern coastline of France in a place called Normandy, the future of civilization hung in the balance. At 6:30 a.m. on June 6, the first wave of American troops landed at Omaha Beach. As their Higgins boat troop carriers opened, 18 and 19 year-old young men from cities and farms, from New York to Nebraska, were asked to do the impossible. Dash across hundreds of yards of open beach with no cover, face a hail of German gunfire, mines and mortars, and take the high ground. Somehow, somehow, they withstood the violence and made their way to steep hillsides.

Last winter, I stood where those soldiers landed, at the water's edge, and looked across that beach. It is hard to get the mind around the chaos of that day - to feel what they felt - as the horror unfolded. I made my way to the hillside, now so peaceful and lovely, and stood in a German bunker. A young German soldier named Severloh manned the machine gun that day. He fired for nine hours straight, weeping at the slaughter as I was told.

I walked around the nearby American cemetery, with its orderly rows of white crosses testifying to the dear price our soldiers paid. I stopped at the grave of Billy D. Harris from Oklahoma. He had married young and died young. His young wife didn't know her husband had been killed and buried there until about ten years ago. Such is the chaos of war. She never remarried – she had all her hopes that her husband would return.

I proceeded on to the little town of Sainte-Mère-Église where our airborne troops landed the night before the D-Day invasion. Some fell into the town square occupied by the Germans. One soldier's parachute got caught on the church roof and he hung there as the battle raged below. A replica of the parachute and soldier still hangs from the church.

In August of 1944, a young medical doctor left his wife and two children and joined the army. He was first headquartered in a hospital in England, where the last official records show he was located. As Patton's army moved against the Germans, Captain Luther Fortenberry went into action in France, probably to begin field hospital operations. In November of 1944, he was killed by ordinance explosion. He was my grandfather. He was initially buried at the cemetery at Sainte-Mère-Église and eventually re-interred at Arlington National Cemetery in northern Virginia.

As part of our civic life, we honor the memory of all those who have served us. We all know of the great battles and heroic sacrifices at places like Bunker Hill, Omaha Beach, Khe Sanh, and Fallujah. What we do not know are the untold stories, witnessed by no-one, of Americans who fought it out to the death to preserve our country. We also do not know the untold stories of the many who left their families and quietly performed their duty, with no questions asked or demands made. The veterans who maintained tanks and aircraft, cooked, computed, cleaned, and drove.

To all who have served: Thank you. We honor you this Veterans Day. We have just been through a very hard fought, difficult election. Yes, it was a bit nasty, a bit out of the margins of civility, but it was still conducted without violence and without bloodshed. Veterans Day reminds each generation that sometimes the tranquility of order comes at a very high price.